What is a Natural Heritage Program?

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NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAMS are unique public-private partnerships dedicated to gathering and maintaining the best scientific information on biological diversity to help guide conservation decisions. Natural Heritage Programs were conceived by The Nature Conservancy to meet the organization's need for sound science information as well as to help guide the broader and growing public constituency interested in conserving biological diversity. In 1974 the South Carolina Department of Wildlife and Marine Resources and The Nature Conservancy launched the first Natural Heritage Program. Since 1974, there are now over 85 programs, called Natural Heritage Programs domestically and Conservation Data Centers internationally. These programs make up the Heritage Network and include 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, five Canadian provinces, 12 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and a host of other programs situated in federal agencies.

How Natural Heritage Programs Work

Natural Heritage Programs use a standardized information management system to track important biological data including taxonomy, distribution, population trends, habitat requirements, relative abundance, quality, condition, and viability. Critical non-biological information is also tracked such as land ownership type, land use and management, distribution of protected areas, and threats to species or their habitat. The information management system has three major components: structured paper files, geographic files (maps and geographical information systems), and a computerized database that integrates the biological and non-biological information.

Natural Heritage Programs have three broad functions: (1) to collect information on the status and distribution of species and natural communities from as many sources as possible (museums, experts, field inventories, published and unpublished literature); (2) to manage this information in a standard way; and (3) to disseminate this information to a wide array of users. Typical program staff may include a director, zoologist, botanist, ecologist, science information manager, and a GIS technician.

The Biological and Conservation Data (BCD) System is computer software designed specifically for use by Natural Heritage Programs and Conservation Data Centers. Developed by The Nature Conservancy over 25 years of testing and refinement, BCD is a fully relational database management system containing 36 files and more than 2,000 fields for linking essential information. Use of standard methods and software allows exchange of information among programs and the aggregation and analysis of data across administrative and geopolitical boundaries. This means that an occurrence for a red-cockaded woodpecker in Georgia is documented in the same way as an occurrence for one in Alabama, which allows us to compare populations across the species' ecological range. We can then target the healthiest and most viable occurrences for conservation action so that limited dollars are spent in the best way possible.

The Nature Conservancy and the Natural Heritage Network are currently pooling information on conservation targets like the red-cockaded woodpecker across defined ecological regions. Alabama shares a portion of five of the 64 ecological regions identified by The Nature Conservancy for the United States. A plan for each region is being designed to conserve the characteristic biodiversity of that region through an identified set of conservation sites. The end result will be a blueprint for conservation for our entire country.

Status of the Natural Heritage Network

Today, the majority of Natural Heritage Programs reside as part of their state government's Department of Natural Resources, but some programs exist in universities, state parks, state fish and wildlife departments, and a few are still maintained by The Nature Conservancy. The Nature Conservancy plays a critical role in this public-private partnership through establishment, development, and ongoing support of the Natural Heritage Network. The Nature Conservancy maintains the central databases, regular computerized data-exchanges, training and technical support in standard methodology, database management, GIS and related technologies, national vegetation classification, and program administration. Continued development and documentation of standard methods including software applications is a key role for The Nature Conservancy that helps keep the Network at the forefront of biodiversity information technology.

The Natural Heritage Network has become well established and responsibilities for its maintenance are great. Coordinating the many public-private partnerships and focusing on the mission to supply and disseminate the best information on the world's biological diversity has become overly burdensome for The Nature Conservancy in addition to its mission to conserve and protect the land and waters necessary for the diversity of life on earth. The Association for Biodiversity Information (ABI) is an international conservation organization that formed to focus on the unification, support, and representation of the Natural Heritage Network in the mission of collecting, interpreting, and disseminating ecological information critical to the conservation of the world's biological diversity. The Nature Conservancy and ABI have agreed to work together to create a new non-profit organization whose goal is to become the authoritative source of information on the conservation of elements of biodiversity. The Nature Conservancy is providing funding, expertise, and biodiversity information to help

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front end of the ATV to rise. Caution should be used not to expect more from your ATV than it can safely provide.

Whenever equipment is added, counterweights can be used to offset the load and improve the new balance of your machine. Be careful not to exceed the weight limitations set forth by the ATV manufacturer. Remember, just because your ATV can pull a heavy load does not mean it can safely stop it.

Additional equipment may also require additional protective gear for the operator. Examples of this include protection from objects thrown by a mower and chemical protection from the drift of sprayers.

Training Course

Four major U.S. ATV distributors established the Specialty Vehicle Institute of America (SVIA) in 1983 to support the safe and responsible use of ATVs. Current membership includes Arctic Cat, Bombardier, Honda, KTM, Kawasaki, Suzuki and Yamaha, the leading U.S. distributors of all-terrain vehicles. In 1988 the SVIA formed a new division, the ATV Safety Institute (ASI), to expand the availability of the ATV *RiderCourse*.

ASI offers free training to purchasers of new ATVs and their eligible immediate family. The ATV *RiderCourse* is a half-day, hands-on safety training program. The program includes pre-ride inspections, starting and stopping, turning, operation on hills, emergency stopping and swerving, and riding over obstacles. It also covers protective riding gear, environmental concerns, local laws, and safety techniques. The training course is taught by licensed instructors at hundreds of locations across the United States.

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launch the organization. ABI, the current membership organization for the Natural Heritage Network, is restructuring itself to become the new organization. This new arrangement will overcome the problems currently encountered by the fragmented responsibilities of ABI, The Nature Conservancy, and individual Network programs in developing, managing, and aggregating Network data. More importantly, it will place leadership for the Network in the hands of an organization dedicated solely to furtherance of the Network and the application of Heritage data to biodiversity conservation. If you would like to know more about the Natural Heritage Program in Alabama contact:

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To learn more about the Natural Heritage Network, check out the Web site at www.hertitage.tnc.org.

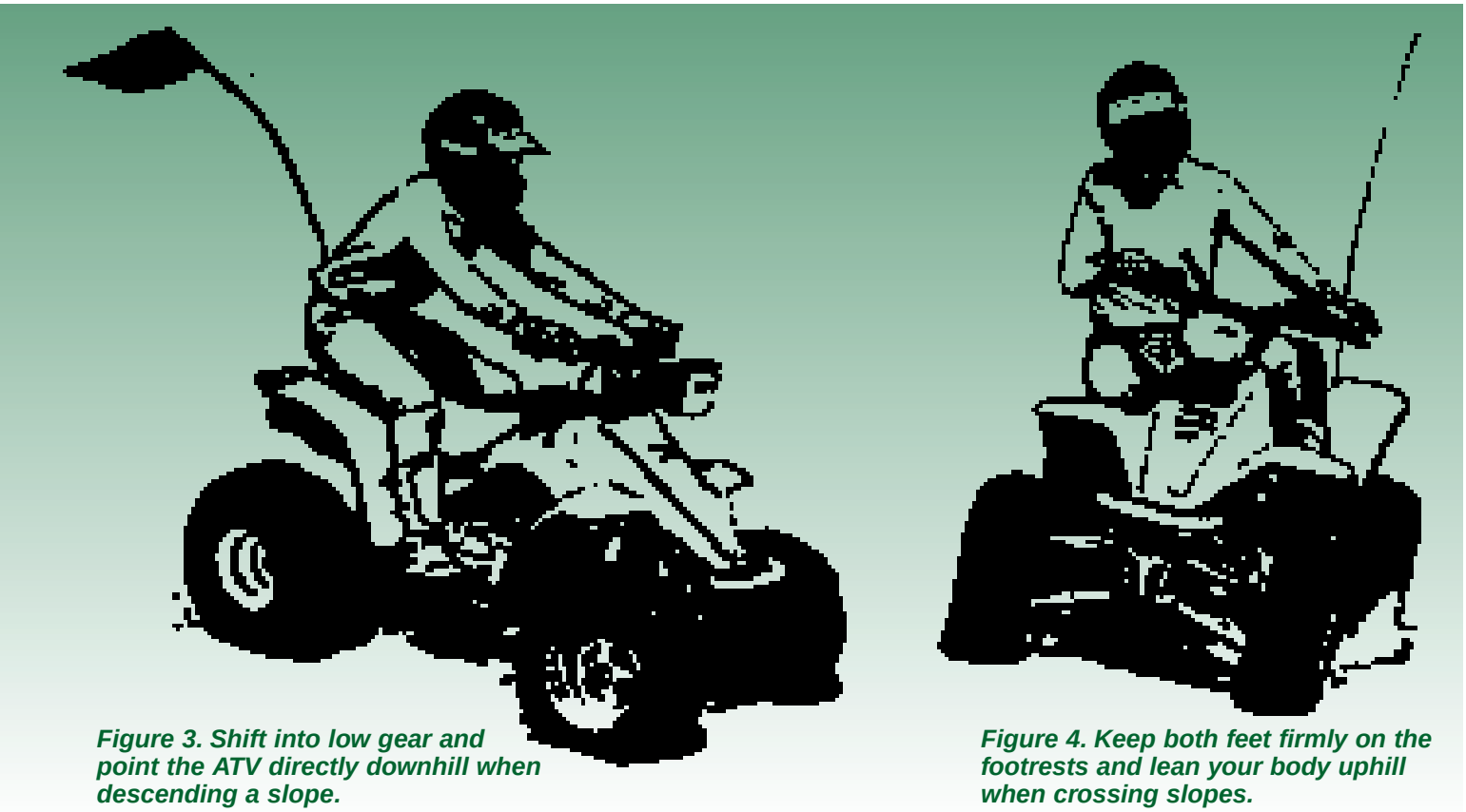

Figure 3. Shift into low gear and point the ATV directly downhill when descending a slope.

Figure 4. Keep both feet firmly on the footrests and lean your body uphill when crossing slopes.